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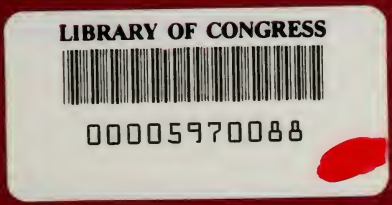

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WHAT GOD REQUIRES OF THIS NATION.

A SERMON

Preached on Fast Day, April 30, 1863,

IN THE

PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH, LENA, ILL.,

BY

REV. ISAAC B. BRANCH,

Pastor of the Baptist Church.

CHICAGO:
CHURCH & GOODMAN,
51 La Salle Street.
1863.

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LENA, APRIL 31, 1863.

REV. ISAAC B. BRANCH:

Dear Sir — Believing that the good of our common country and the cause of truth will be advanced thereby, we, the undersigned, respectfully request a copy of your sermon, delivered on Fast Day, April 30, 1863, for publication.

Respectfully yours,

S. H. McEASTMAN,
W. W. HALL,
E. RIPLEY,
D. BAILEY,
J. B. HINCKLEY,
G. M. BARNES.

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WHAT GOD REQUIRES.

ISAIAH, lviii: 6: Is not this the fast that I have chosen; to loose the bands of wickedness, to undo the heavy burdens, and to let the oppressed go free, and that ye break every yoke?

We are gathered here to-day in answer to the call of our Chief Magistrate. He invites us to seek the forgiveness of God for our national and individual sins. And while it becometh us to worship God in the great congregation, I would fain believe that you have not forgotten your family altars and your closets. That from these has already ascended your humble and penitent cry for mercy, mingled with devout adoration of the Giver of every good and perfect gift. If these have been neglected, you are but poorly prepared for the solemn assembly, and the instructions of the sanctuary.

God alone can give us a teachable spirit in those things pertaining to his worship; and especially ability to discover the nature and number of our sins. We are constitutionally opposed to self-examination. Sin lurks in the secret chambers of the heart.—

Like a nest of vipers in the deep, dark recesses of the rocks, it hides from the light; we see not its double tongue, nor its slimy contortions. We dread not its deadly fangs, until God pours a flood of divine, all-searching light upon the foul nest of corruption. And, even then, like Cleopatra, we are much inclined to hide the viper amid the flowers and fruits of self-deception until it has accomplished its work of death.

If this be true of the sins of the individual heart, it is true, in a ten-fold degree, of the sins of this great Nation. Patriotism, and national pride conspire to blind a republican people to their national sins. Add to this the constantly cherished idea that as individuals among the millions, we—*i. e.*—you and I, are not responsible for the sins of the nation, and we find one of the chief obstacles to national repentance and reform. Patriotism, than which, properly exercised, man has not a nobler virtue, Patriotism, I say, in swelling enthusiasm, cries out, "My country first! my country last! and my country forever!" And just one step further it cries, "My country, right, or wrong!"—This last was well-nigh a cry of universal acceptance in the late war with Mexico; and yet a more heaven-daring sentiment, in war or peace, was never adopted by any people, and especially by a people who have the power to make their nation just what they please. The fact is, there is no true patriot-

riotism in such a war cry. My country right is my country preserved and defended by the power of God, and my country wrong is my country in defiance of God Almighty. He who will do wrong for his country, will not scruple to do wrong against his country, whenever interest prompts him to such a course. As evidence of this, let me say that, so far as my memory serves me, the very men who were the bold originators of this horrid war-cry then, are the same men who now, when our country is well-nigh rent into ruinous fragments by this unholy rebellion, cry, "Peace—peace," and "Remember the Constitutional rights of the rebels."—They look upon our country, bleeding at every pore, caring not that she is either in her death agonies, or the birth throe of a higher life; and like the venomous serpent, they strike their deadly fangs into her body corporate whenever and wherever they can do so and escape the war-club of her wrath. The fact is no man ever was a true patriot, who avowed himself ready to do or defend wrong for his country. I repeat he who will do wrong for his country, will do wrong against his country!

God has brought our executive and law-making power to acknowledge that somehow and somewhere there is a wrong among us, for which He is justly angry with us as a nation. And we are called together to-day to fast and pray, and seek to know what

that wrong is, that we may forsake it and obtain forgiveness. If we would obtain forgiveness of God we must fast in such a manner as will please God. It is, then, a question of the first importance, "How should our nation fast?" I shall endeavor to answer this question, and with this object in view, I have chosen the text as a key to a right understanding of what God will accept at our hands.

Isaiah was sent as a prophet to teach nations. His was no mission to individuals, except when individuals stood as representatives of a people. Hence you will find his prophecies addressed to Israel, Judah and the surrounding nations. This fact is of great importance in rightly understanding our text. That which is spoken to a nation, in its corporate capacity is often quite different from that which would be spoken to an individual under similar circumstances. What would be quite inapplicable and inappropriate to the one, would be entirely appropriate to the other.

Our text and context are emphatically national in their bearing. Otherwise understood, they are in tacit contradiction with other portions of God's word. Of individuals God accepts prayer and fasting in sackcloth and ashes. When the wicked king Ahab, by the advice of the woman Jezebel, had killed Naboth, and was about to take possession of his vineyard, he was met by

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Elijah with denunciations for the act, and immediately "he rent his clothes and put sackcloth upon his flesh, and fasted, and lay in sackcloth, and went softly," and the Lord accepted it at his hands, so far as to put away the threatened calamity from him as an individual; but as kings, neither he nor his family put away their idolatrous oppression, nor loosed in their hearts their bands of wickedness, and God finally cut them off with all the leaders in that national rebellion. So also these Jews whom Isaiah addressed in our text, had fasted and were fasting as individuals. They were afflicting their souls—some of them hypocritically, it is true—but many sincerely. The honest and faithful among them wept over the sins of the nation, and all such men as Isaiah and Jeremiah would gladly have put away the fearful sin of their nation; but it was beyond their power. The great mass of the nation was wholly given up to idolatry and its laws were idolatrous and oppressive. So that, while as individuals, many of them fasted, and went softly before the Lord, and were accepted in so doing, yet, as a nation, God visited upon them the threatened calamities, and as individuals they suffered in those calamities.

While a minority thus fasted, the majority fasted for strife, seeking by outward and apparent sorrow to avert the threatened calamities, that they might have the better op-

portunities under cover of national laws and customs to oppress and smite their fellows with the fist of wickedness. But our context says all this will not do; this is not the fast that God has chosen. Thus our text teaches that,

The only fast which God accepts of nations in their corporate capacity is the absolute and entire abolition, putting away of all wicked and oppressive laws. This is the fast he has chosen. And this fact is not without its obvious reasons:

I. The first of these is that nations, as such, have no bodies except a body corporate, and this body corporate cannot hunger and thirst—it cannot fast and pray. It cannot sit in sackcloth, nor yet dwell in ashes, with any consciousness of sorrow, or affliction. If our nation must fast literally, who shall go hungry? Shall Abraham Lincoln? He is not the nation. Shall Congress and the Judges of the Supreme Court? These are not the nation. Shall the Cabinet? They are not the nation. All, all these might die to-morrow, and still the nation would exist. All these may fast, and still the nation does not fast. Yet all these, elected by the people, create and keep in existence what God recognizes as the nation.

II. *Nations, as such, have no soul except their expressed will or their enacted laws.*—That which stands before God as the responsible existence of a nation is its corporate

doings. God recognizes as the nation what man recognizes as the nation, viz., *not* the *agent*; but the *act*. To illustrate, a minister of state to a foreign government, no matter how acceptable as an individual, will not be accepted and accredited if the *law-making power* instructs him to do things offensive to that government. Thus God told Israel (See Ezekiel 14: 20) when the elders came to inquire of him, he would punish Israel for her sins, and "though Noah, Daniel and Job were in it, they shall deliver neither son nor daughter. They shall deliver but their own souls by their righteousness." God looks behind the individual representative of a nation, righteous though he may be, and judges it by its national acts. Hence, the only way in which a nation, as such, can keep a fast acceptably to God is by putting away its wicked laws, its offensive corporate acts. This is the fast which God has chosen for nations. This, and *this only*, will he accept at our hands to turn away his wrath from us!

Now proper religious fasting by the individual includes the hunting out and putting away sin, and also incidentally the purifying of body and soul. But you and I, and millions more, including every individual in this state and nation, may bow down our heads like a bulrush with sorrow, afflicting and purifying as far as in our power soul and body both, and it will never purify the

soul and body of this nation! God recognizes our Constitution and Laws as the body and soul of this nation. As individuals we may, and *should* exercise the most humble penitence on account of the part we have had in the great sins of which the nation is guilty, and yet this will be at most but the beginning of the national fast which God requires of us. Nay, *if we go no further* it will not be the beginning of such a fast! God requres of nations, as such, not sackcloth, ashes and tears, but *acts!* Acts that purge our statute books and Constitution! Not that *a man* should afflict his soul, but that *a nation* should arise in its might and put away its legalized abominations! Let us not deceive ourselves; "God is not mocked." Let us not suppose that when we, the people of this nation, have becomingly spent this day of fasting and prayer we have done *all* that God requires of us—that we may then fold our hands in self-complacent expectation that God will put away his judgments from us. Nay, let us rather feel that we have just buckled on our armor and rubbed the dust from our eyes; that from this good hour we will go forth to hunt these obnoxious, God-defying laws from our statute books as the Jews did the old leaven from their houses, that as a state and a nation we may become a new lump, which shall not be a stench in the nostrils of Jehovah.

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That we may the better understand what we have to do, and where to begin in this work, let us turn again to our text and endeavor to learn how to please God, in an acceptable and appropriate National Fast. Our text reads— "Is not this the fast that I have chosen, to loose the bands of wickedness, to undo the heavy burdens, and to let the oppressed go free, and that ye break every yoke?"

1. The first thing which we find here that God chooses, is, "to loose the bands of wickedness." These bands of wickedness I understand to mean the combinations which men form for the purpose of carrying out their wicked and selfish designs and purposes. Had we any of these among us when this war commenced? Let us see. What were our two great political parties, and what had been their most prominent objects? I ask in all candor if their real foundation principles had not been, "To the victors belong the spoils?" which is only another version of "Might makes right." And I ask again if, in carrying out this principle, they had not vied with each other in efforts to see which could most effectually "out-Herod Herod" in repudiating the law of God as being not at all applicable to national affairs? Have not both these parties in nearly all cases sought so to construe our Constitution as utterly to repudiate justice to one class, while they fed and the fostered

other on the spoils of oppression? Look at it! While the Constitution winks hard at slavery and oppression, it does not, except by forced yet customary construction, sanction or establish that crime against God and man—human chattelism. But both parties, embodying the law-making power, have so interpreted it as to favor the oppressor and not the oppressed.

First came the compromises with the slave oligarchy. Next came the annexation of Texas to keep up the balance of power for slavery. Next the Mexican war, which, however much that brigand people may have deserved it, will be found to have been gotten up, *nominally* to avenge our wrongs, but *really* to extend the area of slavery. And it is no thanks to the wire-workers that it failed in the execution. It was God's mercy to this nation that prevented it. Had the territory acquired from Mexico been made slave territory it would have added not only the population, but the gold and silver of California to swell the number and wealth of our enemies. Do you doubt it? Show me one foot of slave territory which did not side with the rebellion in the outset of this war. On the other hand, where is there a single rood of free territory which has stood up to divide and cripple our nation?

Thus we see that had not God in his providence overthrown the quondam schemes

of these bands of wickedness, our nation would, in all probability, have been hopelessly rent asunder. Next after this Mexican war scheme came the oppressor thundering at the doors of the Capitol, demanding greater security for slave property. And Congress, instead of telling him in the true *spirit* of the Constitution, "Go, sir, and take your chattels as Northern and Southern men do their horses; go 'prove property, pay charges and take them away,'" instead of saying or doing this, Congress passed a law which mounted, booted and spurred every U. S. Marshal in the land and set him off with all the blood-hounds of the nation yelping at his heels, to catch the panting fugitive to whom *God* had said "If ye may be free, choose it rather."

And a vast majority of the nation sanctioned and glorified this law; notwithstanding it actually violated the Constitution in many of its provisions; not the least of which is its unlawful suppression of the right to the writ of habeas corpus. And, by the way, it is a curious fact that the very men who have been the most earnest in abetting the execution of that illegal and unnecessary suppression of that writ, are the first to groan under its *necessary* and *legal* suppression at the present time! Thus it is that God often pays men down in their own coin.

But, to return, when all this had been

done, as if the nation was not enough committed to slavery by the Constitution and by this law, the Supreme Court came in with a decision which virtually said that one class, of four millions, had no rights which the out-numbering millions were bound to respect. In other words, "might makes right," and "to the victors belong the spoils." And the two great parties vied with each other in seeing which could most fully endorse the measure, and carry enough of the people with them to secure political preferment. Were these bands of wickedness or were they not? Look at them with eyes opened by the incidents and necessities of this war, and then decide the question. And did not these party bands extend from the school-house caucus for Constable up to the halls of Congress and the Supreme Court? Had not political corruption well nigh reached its climax in nearly if not quite all of the political organizations of the day? Had not even professed Christians almost adopted the principle that "religion should have nothing to do with politics?"

Here then was need of such fasting as God requires, viz., "to loose (these party) bands of wickedness." But we did not thus fast. And what we would not do for ourselves God sent this war to do for us. And how like lightning did it accomplish the work! The first gun at Sumter had scarcely ceased to echo through our forests and over our

prairies, when behold Douglas and Seward, and all the then great party-leaders, stood side by side as if by magic, striving to outdo each other in casting down their party war-clubs, and taking up the sword against the hydra-headed monster of this State Rights Slaveholding Rebellion!—a rebellion nursed into life and activity by the cringing compromises of the law-making and executive powers of this nation.

2. The second thing which God requires in an acceptable national fast is "to undo the heavy burdens and let the oppressed go free!" The law of Moses requires that "If thou see the beast of him that hateth thee lying under his burden, thou shalt surely help him." Had we any beasts among us lying under their burdens? Nay, had we not human beings among us who were ground into beasts by the iron heel of oppression? It is a burden under which our Anglo-Saxon blood (to say nothing of the poor African) is bound, and compelled to grind in the prison-house of lust, in utter violation of God's law of marriage, and this too by the sanction of laws backed up and supported by your votes and mine. Were there not, and are there not still, millions groaning and dying under this load of oppression? And is not our national law the galling chain that binds their burden upon them? Did we fast—did we "undo these heavy burdens before this war commenced?

Nay, did we not enter upon this war holding out even to *the rebels* the tempting assurance that, come what would, slavery should remain as it *was?*" The burden should not be undone, and the oppressed should not go free! The spiked heel of our nation should not bate one hair of its pressure upon these four or five millions of human beings! Did we not for months use these very beings as spies and guides for our army, and then either send them back to, or suffer them to fall into the hands of, their masters and be hung for their runaway service to us? Was this undoing the heavy burdens? Was this letting the oppressed go free?

But, as in loosing the bands of wickedness so in this case, what we utterly refused to do God has suffered this war to do for us. It has at last made us to know that by refusing to do this we were but feeding the scorpion which seeks to sting us to death. It has made us ashamed of our imbecility in supposing that we could feed the viper while extracting his fangs. Oh, I remember the words of our noble, yet sometimes erring Commander in Chief when he said, in substance, "I am not prepared to place black men in our army and navy on an equality with our white soldiers in fighting for our country." And I felt and said then, "*that* must be taken back before this war closes." And as I look at the organized regiments of freed men I am ready to exclaim, *not* "See

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how we have fasted as we should have done!" but "See how God has permitted our enemies to compel us to do his pleasure in these things!" Our proclamation of freeedom is not a vountary measure, but it is a war necessity. A cutting of the rope which, by God's permission, was tightening around the neck of this nation, and would soon have garrotted us into submission. And while I honor and respect our President for the act, I repeat, it is not such an act of voluntary fasting as God requires, but an act forced upon us by our own persistent efforts in an opposite direction. Indeed, I know of but one voluntary act of our nation which takes a step in that direction, and that is the abolishing of slavery in the District of Columbia. And to what extent this was not an absolute necessity is yet to be shown. All else has been *wrung from us* by the increasing peril of the nation, as manifested in the full development of this hell-born rebellion!

3. One other point in God's chosen fast claims our special attention at this time, and that is, "that ye break every yoke." Many an ox has been unyoked at night to be yoked again in the morning. And many an *old* ox has been unyoked for the *slaughter*, that an unbroken steer might take his place in the yoke. The yoke was not broken. So Mr. Lincoln in his proclamation has broken no yokes. Thank God, he has un-

yoked some thousands, if not millions, and some of them are already in the ranks for slaughter. But the *yoke* is not yet *broken*. This is yet to be done by the people at the ballot box.

So of the yokes of political parties, they are not yet broken. When the war broke upon us like a summer tornado, the political leaders unyoked the parties and said to them, "Go, fight for your country;" but they set up the yokes for use whenever the "free fight" was over. What said Mr. Douglas? I quote from memory: "First save the Union, and then we shall have a field on which to renew our party contests." And this was adopted and applauded by the great majority of our nation. And it was right, so far as the proposition to save our country was concerned. But he saved the yoke. "Then we shall have a field on which to renew our party contests."*

This unyoking was forced upon the leaders by the fact thhat as a nation we were, and are, well-nigh ruined by wearing these yokes of *party* regardless of *principle*. Let me illustrate this. Here are two men in a frail, open boat on the wide sea. They have gold on board which is the common property of both. They fall into a dispute, each finally laying claim to the entire amount.

* Since this sermon was delivered I see Mr. Crittenden comes out in similar language.

From words they come to blows, and during their violent contest the boat springs a leak, and the water comes pouring in like a flood. They see it; they must bail it or go to the bottom. None but fools or mad men would continue their contest under such circumstances. And so these leaders, like wise men, unyoked the parties and said "Bail out." But I am sorry to say the mad men are not *all* rational yet. There are those that cry lustily "the ship is sinking," and yet continue their unhallowed party contests. These men say, "Wear the yoke now." *Mr. Douglas* said, "Go free and fight for your country, but save the yoke." God says, "Break the yoke." *destroy it utterly*, that men may never come under its conscience-galling crooks again! Look to God for principles and not to party leaders. Party leaders have laughed to scorn all appeals to "God's higher law" and appealed to the Constitution.

There has been, and yet is a Constitution idolatry among us which God abhors. Our fathers that fashioned and adopted our Constitution never dreamed that it was perfect, and therefore made provision for its amendment. But we have christened it a god, and bowed down to worship it. What more does the heathen man? He fashioneth his god with a graving tool, and then bows down to it. God will yet break up this idolatry, if we do not forsake it. And if we

do not purge our state and national constitutions of their yokes of oppression, God will cast them to the moles and bats. Let me not be misinterpreted here. I counsel no violation of these constitutions; but I do say amend them, so that they shall recognize God as the rightful ruler of the universe, and all men as having an "inalienable right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness."

God has partially broken these political party yokes for us, and it remains for us to complete the work. This done, let us hunt for honesty, "thrusting the lantern of Diogenes in the face" of every party, no matter what its name or pretension, and if it bear not the test of this scrutiny, reject it, disown it, trample it under foot. Suffer no yoke to come upon your necks, but that which God imposes—viz., the obligation to do right. When you would seek for a lawmaker, bring out your lantern and hunt for an honest, God-fearing man. Let the first question be that good old Jeffersonian one, "Is he honest?" Not is he a whig, democrat, or a republican, but in all his law making will he fear God and love justice! Let this be the corner stone of preferment and these political and oppressive yokes will be broken, scattered to the four winds, and we shall become "a people whose God is the Lord," and not the Constitution or the party.

Let political leaders know that the people

demand sober, honest men for office and we shall soon see such a fast in our nation as God requires. As it is, we are a nation which is ashamed to acknowledge God in our Constitution and laws, and afraid to altogether deny him. Our reform must begin with the foundation of our Government, the people. But just here lies the difficulty. The masses are corrupted.

It is sometimes said religiously, "Like priest, like people." And it certainly might with equal propriety be said politically—"Like politicians like people." As was said of the Jewish nation, "The whole head is sick and the whole heart is faint." This is shown, not only in our laws, but in the daily transactions of business. It is shown in the laws of our own State. Adultery is a crime unknown to our State laws, while by the same laws our fellow-creatures are being sold into poor-house slavery for the horrid crime of remaining on our polluted soil. Fraud and deception are lurking in almost every corner. Weights are light or heavy to suit the buyer or seller, graduated by the chances of detection. Adulteration of nearly all articles of commerce is the rule, and purity is the great, grand exception. Bankruptcies for large amounts are deliberately planned and executed to enrich the bankrupt. Frauds on the Government are of daily occurrence. Men make haste to be rich, and are not guiltless. Professed reli-

gion shapes itself too often to the demands of a perverted and debauched popular opinion. Even the pulpit must sometimes ring forth the eloquence of angels and the smooth-tongued flattery of devils, or be repudiated by the professed disciples of the meek and lowly Jesus. Truly, "the whole head is sick, and the whole heart is faint."

And what is the remedy? It is not in reform societies. If it were, we had been healed long ago. This is pre-eminently an age of societies. We have societies for everything, and everybody is, more or less engaged in them. The remedy is two-fold, and God alone is the Great Physician. The first remedy is the converting, regenerating power of God. This, and this alone can save us. This, like the salt which Elisha cast into the spring of Jericho, can purify the fountain heads of all this flood of iniquity. The unsavory salt of hypocrisy and false religion will never do it.

The second is the judgments of God.—These cured Sodom, but they destroyed Sodom! And these will soon cure us if the first remedy is not taken by enough individuals to save the nation. God Almighty holds the sceptre of mercy in one hand and the sword of justice in the other, beseeching us as a nation, and as individuals, to touch the one and escape the other. As a nation, we have thus far said, "Nay, we will none of thy reproofs." And He hath already "whet-

ted his glittering sword, and his hand taketh hold on vengeance." Already is the wail of mothers, widows and orphans heard all over the land.

In view of these facts, and what God requires of us, "let us humble ourselves under the mighty hand of God," and mourning over our individual sins, let us arise to "loose the bands of wickedness, to undo the heavy burdens, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke." Let us do this hopefully, trustingly, and with a ready mind. God will hear and answer prayers when our prayers and our acts go together. God does not demand of us in this emergency that we be craven-hearted cowards, and least of all that we be sneaking traitors, snapping and snarling at the heels of those who have gone to fight our battles. But he does demand that we smite with "the sword of the Lord, and of" Lincoln with all becoming loyalty.

Samuel did not a holier work when he "hewed Agag in pieces before the Lord" than do our armies in hewing down these blood-hounds of the Pit, who have come in battle array to destroy the best government in existence. While I see and mourn over the wrongs of the North, I envy not the man who can see no wrongs but Northern wrong-doings, and no rights but the Constitutional rights of rebels. Northern rights as compared with Southern rights in this war are, in my estimation, the rights of Esther and

Mordecai. And Southern rights are the rights of Haman. And my prayer is that God will forgive the penitent and grant the incorrigible traitor his rights.

Pray, my hearers—fast and pray—but see to it that you fast in a political and national, as well as moral and religious sense. Fast at the ballot box if you would save our nation. And by prayers and effort do all in your power to nerve the arm that strikes for liberty, If we strike for liberty we strike for God. If we strike for *oppression God strikes us !*

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